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A synthetic gemstone the size of a Coke can falls through silent darkness. The night is quiet as the grave, colder than midwinter on Pluto. Gossamer sails as fine as soap bubbles droop, the gust of sapphire laser light that inflated them long since darkened; ancient starlight picks out the outline of a huge planet-like body beneath the jewel-and-cobweb corpse of the starwhisp.

Eight years have passed since the good ship *Field Circus* slipped into close orbit around the frigid brown dwarf Hyundai +4904/-56.

Five years have gone by since the launch lasers of the Ring Imperium shut down without warning, stranding the light sail powered craft three light years from home. There has been no response from the router, the strange alien artifact in orbit around the brown dwarf, since the crew of the starwhisp uploaded themselves through its strange quantum entanglement interface for transmission to whatever alien network it connects to. In fact, nothing happens; nothing save the slow trickle of seconds, as a watchdog timer counts down the moments remaining until it is due to resurrect stored snapshots of the crew, on the assumption that their uploaded copies are beyond help.

Meanwhile, outside the light cone?

Amber jolts into wakefulness, as if from a nightmare. She sits bolt upright, a thin sheet falling from her chest; air circulating around her back chills her rapidly, cold sweat evaporating. She mutters aloud, unable to subvocalize, "where am I? oh. A bedroom. How did I get here?" *mumble*. "Oh, I see." Her eyes widen in horror. *It? s not a dream. . . .*

"Greetings, human Amber," says a ghost-voice that seems to come from nowhere: "I see you are awake. Would you like anything?"

Amber rubs her eyes tiredly. Leaning against the bedstead, she glances around cautiously. She takes in a bedside mirror, her reflection in it: a young woman, gaunt in the manner of those whose genome bears the p53 calorie-restriction hack, she has disheveled blonde hair and dark eyes. She could pass for a dancer or a soldier; not, perhaps, a queen. "What? s going on? Where am I? Who are you, and *what am I doing in your head?*"

Her eyes narrow. Analytical intellect comes to the fore as she takes stock of her surroundings. "The router," she mutters. Structures of strange matter in orbit around a brown dwarf, scant light years from Earth. "How long ago did we come through?" Glancing round, she sees a room walled in slabs of close-fitting stone. A window bay is recessed into them, after the style of crusader castles many centuries in the past, but there? s no glass in it? just a blank white screen. The only furniture in the room, besides a Persian carpet on the cold flagstones, is the bed she sits upon. That, and the idiot gun that hovers just beneath the ceiling. She? s reminded of a scene from an old movie, Kubrick? s *Omega*; this whole set-up has got to be deliberate, and it isn? t funny.

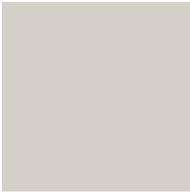
"I? m waiting," she announces, and leans back against the

*Charles Stross lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he destroys laptop keyboards for a living. The first story in this series, "Lobster s" (June 2001), was shortlisted for the Hugo award in 2002. His latest book, Singularity Sky, is due out from Ace Books in August. Another novel, The Atrocity Archive, will be published by Golden Gryphon in the fall.*

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